

## Unfulfilled nation torn from its aboriginal roots

Writer Saul ponders reason for Canada's failure to achieve its full potential

September 21, 2008

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Flying back to Canada from abroad, have you ever noticed that the immigration officer examining your passport is wearing, and perhaps sweating in, a bulletproof vest?

Why the vests when the arriving passengers had already been thoroughly vetted before boarding their flight?

This bureaucratic madness is part of the post-9/11 politics of fear. The vests came with a federal decision to arm all border guards.

"When was the last armed attack at a border post? How many border guards have been shot at? Two? One? Zero? Are they in any real danger? Is the danger greater than for a child crossing a street after school? What is the border guard to do with the pistol, a little training and no daily experience in armed crises?"

The critic is John Ralston Saul, philosopher and prolific writer. He is the author of such groundbreaking bestsellers as *The Collapse of Globalism* (challenging prevailing economic orthodoxy) and *Voltaire's Bastard: The Dictatorship of Reason* (bemoaning the trumping of justice by reason).

His latest book is *A Fair Country, Telling Truths about Canada* (Viking), to be released, propitiously, as it turns out, in time for the Oct. 14 election.

What better time than now for voters and campaigning politicians alike to address Saul's central question: What's wrong with Canada – why has it not reached its full potential, under either the Liberals or the Conservatives?

He raises several sub-questions, which he elaborated on in an interview with me:

- Why is it that Canadians "imagine ourselves playing particular roles at home and abroad, yet rarely play them?"
- Why do we allow more foreign ownership than any other democracy, thereby losing control of such key sectors as the steel industry?
- Why do we have more trade barriers between provinces than with the U.S. and the rest of the world?
- Why are more than 4 million Canadians without a family doctor, the emergency wards overwhelmed, and waiting times for essential surgery unacceptably long?
- Why do we allow our school boards to sell junk food in return for a few corporate dollars, even though youth obesity will cost us all a lot more in health dollars in the long run?
- Why have 5 million Canadians fallen below the poverty line and 750,000 are dependant on food banks, 40 per cent of them children, and nearly 70,000 Torontonians are waiting for affordable housing?

Saul says it took him 10 years to think through these questions and come up with one answer.

In the past, he has lambasted the Canadian bureaucratic/managerial class that, starting in the 1980s, replaced visionary political and economic leaders. Now he has combined that critique with

an intriguing hypothesis:

Canada is in trouble because it has been untethered from its aboriginal moorings. It pretends to be what it is not. It is not European or American.

He writes: "In spite of the enormous role played by churches over the centuries, ours is not a civilization that emerged out of the Judeo-Christian line. Nor did we rise out of the opposite, the secular or the laic. The central inspiration of our country is aboriginal ...

"How we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together, how we treat one another when we are not being stupid is deeply aboriginal ...

"We are a Métis civilization. What we are today is inspired as much by four centuries of life with the indigenous civilizations as by four centuries of immigration."

The aboriginals, with their "idea of expandable and inclusive circles of people," welcomed the French settlers. They taught the newcomers how to survive. They encouraged intermarriage, as did Champlain: "Our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall be one people."

But this mutual approach was abandoned by later settlers in favour of land grabs, broken treaty promises and an assault on the aboriginal way of life.

The Orangemen, in particular, importing their extremist Protestantism, applied their "old European prejudices in a new place," and imposed the language of a "monolithic nation-state, with its ideas of racial purity."

The First Nations were to be assimilated. "This was the underlying theory of the residential school system, with its deadly health conditions, the banning of language and culture, the sexual degradation, physical violence and the disruption of families."

All this was an "artificial Europeanization of Canada."

Along the way, Canada's old governing principle of peace, welfare and good government was replaced by the British in the 1860s with peace, order and good government. This, too, changed the nature of Canada. Gone was the sense of societal welfare, of "the public good, the public weal and the welfare of the people."

If we feel adrift today, Saul argues, it is because we refuse to accept who we were and still are.

It is the aboriginal ideas of harmony, balanced relationships, an inclusive circle, and an appropriate equilibrium between peoples and the land that explain Canada's invention of peacekeeping, the pioneering environmental efforts of Greenpeace, Maurice Strong and David Suzuki, and multiculturalism.

Yet "we have trained ourselves not to see the aboriginal nature of Canadian society ... Our single greatest failure has been our inability to normalize – that is, to internalize consciously – the First Nations as the senior founding pillar of our civilization."

If we did, we would, first, "see the native as a normal person in his or her own right," settle land claims and help stabilize aboriginal communities and, second, come to terms with our identity, develop enough self-confidence to eviscerate our "colonial mentality" and "get on with life."

This would also "give us the strength to transform our ruling elites," who remain hobbled by a colonial insecurity, an inferiority complex. They remain fixated with "the Empire" – London-Paris in the old days, Washington today. They believe that Canada is too insignificant a player in the world to decide its own fate. But it is not.

**More on Thursday.**

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